

# Making the Most of the US Federal Census

## *Class 1: A History of the Census for Family Historians*

Lindsay Fulton, [lindsay.fulton@nehgs.org](mailto:lindsay.fulton@nehgs.org)

### **Introduction**

The decennial U.S. Federal Census is often the first stop for genealogists, as it is the most comprehensive record for residents of the United States from 1790-1950. Authorized by Article 1, Section 1 of the U.S. Constitution, the census was required make an accurate count of the U.S. population for representative purposes. Over time, however, the census has evolved, providing lawmakers with statistical information about immigration, education, income, and ethnicity (to name a few).

Researchers often use the U.S. Census to gather *general* information about their ancestors. Yet, when used to its fullest potential, the census can provide intimate details about an ancestor and their community. This handout provides detailed information about the U.S. Federal Census tabulation process, the records that survive, enumeration questions (by year), as well as general information about federal non-population schedules.

### **How was the Census Tabulated?**

It's important to understand the enumeration process, as it can sometimes explain missing records, duplicate enumerations, and mistakes on a census entry.

**The Enumerator (aka the Assistant)** - Tasked with making a “just and perfect enumeration and description of all persons,” the enumerator was responsible for tabulating answers to specific questions within their designated division. And while the questions and instructions varied by census year, some practices stayed consistent from 1790-1950. For example, the enumerator did not require proof or documentation when tabulating answers, nor did he ask for the correct spelling of a family surname or given name. This practice may explain discrepancies on a census entry and as a result, you should always look for variant and phonetic spellings.

- **1790-1800-** Assistants were assigned a specific division, and after tabulating a town/city/region, they were required to make two copies of the enumeration to be displayed in the most public places for verification. Once verified, one schedule (usually the original enumeration, however there are examples that the displayed copies were used) was filed with the clerk in the respective district court (state) or superior court (territory). The Marshall was then required to file a report with the President of the U.S. (1790) or the Secretary of State (1800). The report was a tabulation of all the statistics and did not include the names of the head of house.

- **1810-1820-** Assistants assigned to a specific division were required to be residents of that city or county. Instructions indicated that they were to make an actual inquiry at each dwelling house or with the head of household. Again, 2 copies were to be displayed in the most public places for verification and 1 enumeration (usually original) was filed with the clerk in the respective district court (state) or superior court (territory). The Marshall was then required to file a report with the Secretary of State. The report was a tabulation of all the statistics and did not include the names of the head of house. In 1830, the courts were asked to forward their 1790-1820 census holdings to the Department of State. Because some courts took poor care of the first four censuses, many of these census records have been lost (*see table on page 3*)
- **1830-1840-** Assistants were assigned a specific division, no more than 1 county, but could include 1 or more towns “which should be distinctly bounded.” They were instructed to make an actual inquiry at each dwelling house or through personal inquiry with a head of household. Assistants submitted 1 copy of their enumeration to the Marshall, who forwarded the results to the clerk in the respective district/territory. The clerks were then responsible for making an additional copy to be sent to the Secretary of State. As a result, the microfilmed enumerations of the 1830 and 1840 censuses were made from the copies sent to Washington; the copies retained by the court clerks may still be held on the county level. (*see table on page 3*)
- **1850-1870-** Beginning in 1850, jurisdiction over the census tabulation was no longer overseen by district court, but rather by the Secretary of State in each territory/state. And for the first-time assistants were provided with specific instructions from the centralized Census Office (est. 1850) and (as usual) assigned a specific division. The assistants submitted their original enumeration at the respective county courthouse. From these originals, the supervising Marshalls made a set of copies to be sent to the proper state/territorial secretary of state. Next, from these copies, the state/territorial secretary of state made copies to be sent to the Census Office in Washington. Therefore, the microfilmed enumerations of the 1850-1870 censuses that you see today are copies of copies first enumerated by the assistants; the copies retained by the county courthouse and the state/territorial Secretary of State remained at the local level. If these copies still exist, they will remain on the local level. (*see table on page 3*)
- **1880-** The Census Office took complete control over the enumeration of the 1880 U.S. Federal Census, from hiring staff to processing tabulations. And, as a result, the Federal courts and state/territorial Secretaries of State were removed from the process. Assistants were assigned an Enumeration District, and each Enumeration District was supervised by one manager who directed the assistants and oversaw that one additional copy was made. The original enumeration was kept at the county courthouse and the additional copy was sent to the Census Office in Washington D.C. So again, the microfilmed censuses that you see today are copies of the original enumeration made by the Enumeration District supervisor (or their staff). If copies of the 1880 census still exist, they were retained by the county courthouse. (*see table on page 3*)



- **1890-** The pre-printed enumeration schedules in 1890 required a separate tabulation for each family unit, rather than the register style that was used in every other census year from 1790-1880 and 1900-1940. As a result, the sheer volume of the census forced Congress to allot money for only one copy, requiring counties to pay for their own official copies. Whether or not a county paid for a copy is unknown, but if one was made (and survived) it would be held on the local level. This procedure change was additionally detrimental, as a 1921 Commerce Building fire destroyed the majority of the original enumeration schedules that were sent to Washington. (*see table on page 3*)
- **1900-1950-**As with the 1890 census, the federal government did not provide funding for additional copies of the 1900-1950 U.S. Census. Instead, if a copy was made, it would be up to the county to provide funding for an additional copy. The enumerator was responsible for a complete count of all persons living in an enumeration district, which was completed block by block. Instructions indicated that the enumerators should not employ a translator and strive to locate the nearest English-speaking resident. If one could not be located, special permission from the supervisor was required to hire a translator. Enumerators were expected to work 8-hour workdays (10 hours in 1900), six days a week. Each day, the enumerator was required to complete two copies of a daily production report and mail the results to their supervisor and the Director at U.S. Census Bureau. Once the assistant completed the enumeration district, the finished schedule would be packed and shipped to their supervisor. 1950 was the last census taken door-to-door.

### Known Extant Records

State	1790	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890
AL	-	Lost	Lost	Lost	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost except parts of Perry Co.
AZ	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Extant for Arizona Co.	Extant	Extant	Lost
AR	-	-	Lost	Lost	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
CA	-	-	-	-	-	-	Extant, except Contra Costa, San Francisco, Santa Clara Co.	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
CO	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
CT	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
DE	Lost	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
DC	-	Extant for MD side; Lost for VA side	Lost	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost



State	1790	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890
FL	-	-	-	-	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant, except Hernando Co.	Extant	Extant	Lost
GA	Lost	Lost, except Oglethorpe Co.	Lost	Extant, except Franklin, Rabun, Twiggs Co.; some Columbia Co.	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost, except part of Muscogee and all of Washington Co.
ID	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Extant	Extant	Lost
IL	-	Lost	Extant for Randolph Co.; St. Clair Co. lost	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost, except part of McDonough Co.
IN	-	Lost	Lost	Extant, except Daviess Co.	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
IA	-	-	-	-	-	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
KS	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
KY	Lost	Lost	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
LA	-	-	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant, except Bienville parish	Extant	Extant	Lost
ME	Extant	Extant, except part of York Co.	Extant, except part of Oxford Co.	Extant, except part of Washington Co.	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
MD	Extant, except Allegany Calvert, Somerset Co.; most of Dorchester Co.	Extant, except Baltimore Co. (outside of city)	Extant	Extant	Extant, except Montgomery, Prince George's, Queen Anne's, St. Mary's, Somerset	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
MA	Extant	Extant, except most of Suffolk Co.	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
MI	-	Lost	Lost	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost

State	1790	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890
MN	-	-	-	-	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost, except part of Wright Co.
MS	-	Lost	Lost	Extant	Extant, expect Pike Co.	Extant	Extant	Extant, except Hancock, Sunflower, and Washington Co.	Extant	Extant	Lost
MO	-	-	Lost	Lost	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
MT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
NE	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
NV	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
NH	Extant	Extant, except part of Rockingham and Strafford Co.	Extant	Extant, except for Grafton, part of Rockingham, and most of Strafford Co.	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
NJ	Lost	Lost, except Cumberland Co.	Lost	Lost	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
NM	-	-	-	-	-	-	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
NY	Extant	Extant	Extant, except Cortland and part of Broome Co.	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost, except part of Suffolk and Westchester Co.
NC	Extant, except Caswell, Granville and Orange Co.	Extant	Extant, except Craven, Greene, New Hanover and Wake Co.	Extant, except Currituck, Franklin, Martin, Montgomery, Randolph and Wake Co.	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost, except part of Gaston and Cleveland Co.
ND	-	-	-	-	-	-	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost

State	1790	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890
OH	-	Lost, except Washington Co.	Lost, except Washington Co.	Extant, except Franklin, Wood Co.	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost, except part of Hamilton, Clinton Co.
OK	-	-	-	Lost	-	-	-	Extant	-	-	Lost
OR	-	-	-	-	-	-	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
PA	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
RI	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
SC	Extant	Extant, except Richland district	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
SD	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost, except Union Co.
TN	Lost	Lost	Lost, except Rutherford, some of Grainger Co.	Lost for east TN: Anderson, Bledsoe, Blount, Campbell, Carter, Claiborne, Cocke, Grainger, Greene, Hamilton, Hawkins, Jefferson, Knox, McMinn, Marion, Monroe, Morgan, Rhea, Roane, Sevier, Sullivan, Washington Co.	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
TX	-	-	-	-	-	-	Extant, except no census taken in El Paso Co.	Extant, except Blanco, Tarrant Co.	Extant, except Palo Pinto (maybe never taken)	Extant	Lost, except (some) Ellis, Hood, Kaufman, Rusk, Trinity Co.

State	1790	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890
UT	-	-	-	-	-	-	Extant (1851)	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
VA	Lost	Lost, except Accomack and Louisa Co.	Extant, except Alexandria, Grayson, Greenbrier, Halifax, Hardy, Henry, James City, King William, Lee, Louisa, Mecklenburg, Nansemond, Northampton, Orange, Patrick, Pittsylvania, Russell, and Tazwell Co.	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
VT	Extant (1791)	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
WA	-	-	-	-	-	-	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
WV	Lost	Lost	Extant, except Cabell, Greenbrier, Hardy, and Tazewell Co.	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
WI	-	-	-	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost
WY	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Extant	Extant	Extant	Lost

### Published U.S. Federal Census Resources

*The Census Book: Facts, Schedules & Worksheets for the U.S. Federal Censuses* by William Dollarhide  
(Orting, Wash.: Family Roots Publishing Co., 2019)

*Map Guide to the U.S. Federal Census, 1790-1920* by William Dollarhide and William Thorndale  
(Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1987)

*A Census of Pensioners for Revolutionary or Military Service* by the U.S. Census Bureau (Baltimore:  
Genealogical Publishing, 1989)

Portable Genealogist: *Using the Federal Census: 1790-1840* by Lindsay Fulton (NEHGS, 2015)

Portable Genealogist: *Using the Federal Census 1850-1950* by Lindsay Fulton (NEHGS, 2015, 2022)

### **Published Geographical Resources**

*Redbook: American State County and Town Sources*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition edited by Alice Eichholz (Provo, Utah: Ancestry, 2004)

*Genealogist Handbook for New England Research*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition edited by Rhonda R. McClure (Boston, Massachusetts: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2022)

*New York Family History Research Guide and Gazetteer* (New York, New York: New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, 2014)

### **Web Resources**

[www.AmericanAncestors.org](http://www.AmericanAncestors.org); [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com); [www.FamilySearch.org](http://www.FamilySearch.org) (and others) provide searchable transcriptions and/or digital images of the U.S. Federal Census from 1790 to 1950

[www.census.gov/history/index.html](http://www.census.gov/history/index.html)- Maintained by the U.S. Census Bureau – Invaluable resource for U.S. Federal Census instructions 1790-2020, agency history, index to questions for the 1790-2020 U.S. Federal Census, population maps, and more

[www.stevemorse.org/](http://www.stevemorse.org/)- While this resource has little for the 1790-1840 U.S. Census, it is a wonderful resource for later Censuses, including a database for enumeration districts, streets, and enumeration district maps

[www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Main_Page)- Helpful tool for genealogists looking for a general overview of a record or resource with links. These pages often provide suggestions for other research avenues and possible problems with a record set